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The Evolutionary Origins and Psychology of Charismatic Leadership

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“One of the most universal cravings of our time is a hunger for compelling and creative leadership.”

~James MacGregor Burns

Theoretical Summary:

The aim of this thesis is to apply the theoretical background of Evolutionary Leadership Theory (Van Vugt & Ahuja, 2010) to an investigation of the emergence and effectiveness of charismatic leadership. An enormously popular topic of debate among researchers across the social sciences, the study of charismatic leadership has taken many forms in both theory and practice, but its impact on society is undeniable. Through the lens of evolutionary psychology, we can sift through the many theories of charismatic leadership to look for commonalities that arise from the functioning of underlying psychological mechanisms that may have served adaptive purposes in our ancestral past. This theoretical framework allows us to generate novel hypotheses about when and how charismatic leaders will emerge, and to better understand what charisma is, where it comes from, and why it can have such profound effects on the behavior of followers.

I begin with a targeted review of those areas that have been identified as the most significant challenges in the extant literature: theoretical and methodological issues which cast doubt on the utility of many of the observations, experiments, and interventions that can be found in the existing literature, and how the tension between the many competing approaches has given rise to a proliferation of different approaches to its study. Finally, I

highlight some of the advantages which result from defining charismatic leadership as a signaling process, and point out several key areas in which the conceptualization of “signals” employed by economists and game theorists can be clarified and augmented with insights from the literature on signaling as defined by evolutionary biologists.

From this perspective it is possible to (a) categorize previous approaches to understanding charisma according to the level of analysis they address – whether they provide *proximate* or *ultimate* explanations, (b) draw an important distinction between correlates, cues, and signals, and their implications for charismatic signaling in humans, (c) propose a theory about the possible adaptive benefits of charismatic signaling, and (d) support this claim using empirical evidence from multiple lines of laboratory-based experiments.

Empirical Summary:

In Studies 1 and 2 I tested the hypothesis that participant’s leadership preferences and attributions of charisma would vary systematically in response to both (1) the context in which leadership selection occurred and (2) information signaled by facial attributes of the candidates. The results of both studies were consistent with this hypothesis, demonstrating that overall such congruent pairs (e.g. masculinized face in the war condition, older face in the stability condition) were indeed both preferred as leaders and attributed more charisma. Furthermore, these charisma ratings partially (Study 1) and fully (Study 2) mediated the relationship between condition and general preferences.

In Studies 3, 4 and 5 I tested the hypothesis that priming participants with charismatic leadership cues would increase prosocial behavior across several economic games. The results of Study 3 and 4 supported this prediction by demonstrating that participants who were primed with a video clip of a charismatic speaker gave larger donations in the Dictator

Game. The results of Study 4 provided further support by demonstrating that second movers in the Trust Game voluntarily returned a greater percent of the offer sent by first movers -- even though there was no strategic reason to do so -- after being primed with the same charismatic leader stimulus. Finally, Study 5 provided some positive evidence regarding the generalizability of the effect, both by replicating the results of Studies 3 and 4 using a different charismatic manipulation, and by providing evidence from the Stag Hunt game. Taken together, these findings provide supporting evidence for the theory that charismatic leadership may be an effective instrument to galvanize cooperation and prosociality among strangers.

In Study 6 I sought to replicate and extend previous research on the influence of facial appearance on voting decisions. After being primed with a text emphasizing the need for either intergroup conflict or cooperation, I found that participants differentially attributed personality traits to artificially masculinized or feminized photographs of the candidates for the 2016 US Presidential Elections. These findings provide further empirical support for the Evolutionary Contingency Hypothesis of leadership. They suggest that followership heuristics based on facial cues can still affect leadership and personality attributions, even in real-world elections today, where voters are involved and have some information about the candidates. In addition, we find further evidence for a relationship between party affiliation (Republican vs Democrat) and preferences for more masculine leaders.